

1-1-1997

Hearing God's Voice, Thomas Olbricht

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Recommended Citation

Foster, Douglas A. (1997) "Hearing God's Voice, Thomas Olbricht," *Leaven*: Vol. 5: Iss. 4, Article 13.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol5/iss4/13>

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Book Reviews
Markus McDowell,
Eleanor Daniel, Editors



Thomas H. Olbricht, *Hearing God's Voice: My Life with Scripture in the Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1996), 447 pages. Reviewed by Douglas A. Foster.

Tom Olbricht has helped shape the thinking of thousands of leaders in Churches of Christ in his long and active career as minister and teacher. In this intensely personal account of his developing understanding of the nature of Scripture, O. provides an "autobiographical hermeneutic" as he unfolds the story of his fruitful career. In a style reminiscent of Reinhold Niebuhr's *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, O. conveys profound theological insights through accounts of his own life experiences.

The author immediately makes it clear that he felt neither the desire nor the capability of producing a traditional hermeneutics textbook. This is, rather, narrative theology. In eleven chapters O. proceeds chronologically through his personal story, focusing in each phase on the ways he and those around him have interpreted and acted upon Scripture. He sets the stage for his narrative in the introduction with the principle that interpretation must begin with a biblical understanding of God. "If we interpret the Bible properly we do not come face to face with a sure-fire scheme. We come face to face with the living God, through Christ his Son and the Holy Spirit" (11).

The rest of the book is O.'s account of trying to do just that in the struggles of a Christian life.

His first impressions of the Bible were as a handbook of puzzles to be solved, a book of facts and rules, and a constitution for the church and morality. Yet he recalls that his mother conveyed to him the concept of the Bible as story, "more to do with the replication of the lives of those whose stories are told than with argument over words and doctrines" (33). Not until later would he weigh the implications of those contrasting ideas.

Embedded in the historical details of his life are numerous valuable gems of insight. Here are a few. While defining hermeneutics early in the book as "perspectives and commitments from which believers put questions to the Scriptures in order to determine how to hear the voice of the living God and live accordingly" (16), he admits later that "in the final analysis, the most important questions are those the Scriptures put to us" (150). The importance of the concrete needs and circumstances of the hearers must never cause the interpreter to sidetrack the Bible's own questions.

Concerning the anti-intellectual tendency still present in many of our churches, O. remarks, "It is one thing to do the best one can with the training and light God has provided in order to answer to God for oneself. It is another to display the shingle of 'God's Official Interpreter' without proper training and tools" (203). In a consider-

ation of preaching approaches, he concludes that “[l]iving under the judgment of the Word is much more likely to happen in textual preaching” than in topical (231). In chapter 9, titled “The Heart of the Scriptures,” O. speaks of the command/example/inference approach to interpretation and asserts that “[w]hen our hermeneutic is biblical, our inferences focus precisely upon ways in which the actions of Christ inform our actions” (352).

In chapter 10, O. summarizes the results of his study in a seven-part approach to interpreting a scripture. He cautions that the list will appear abstract out of the context of the previous chapters, then proceeds to apply the method to two very specific situations. The first deals with questions of worship that arose in the Minter Lane Church of Christ in Abilene; the second, with issues surrounding the role of women in the Malibu congregation. O. has served both churches as elder.

As he unfolds his personal story, O. also provides valuable insight into the historical sources of hermeneutical positions held by Churches of Christ. Particularly helpful are discussions of our Puritan intellectual roots in chapter 2, the origins of the command/example/inference hermeneutic in chapter 3, Alexander Campbell’s interpretive understandings in chapter 4, and the hermeneutical ideas of fourth-century church father Basil the Great in chapter 6.

The maxims and historical data emerge only in the context of O.’s specific story. Detached from that story, they would have much less impact on the reader. I must admit that at times I found it difficult to see the relevance of all the details O. relates. Furthermore, he is surprisingly frank in his evaluations of the work of others with whom he had contact through the years. He himself acknowledges the seeming irrelevancy of much of the story to the matter of hermeneutics. But he explains that his point was to show that his perspectives are not the product of unconnected theoretical scholarship, but the result of years of working with specific congregations and with Churches of Christ throughout the world.

The particularity of O.’s story is both its greatest weakness and its greatest strength. The specific people and events detailed will most interest readers acquainted with those individuals and happenings. Yet only in the particularities of a specific life can one find universals. O.’s story, while unique in its particulars, is universal. Not necessarily that everyone will reach identical conclusions and understandings. But in Churches of Christ and other bodies

that have tended to encase Scripture in rather narrow bounds, this story of the growing realization of the full significance and power of God’s written Word in the life of one believer will be the story of many.

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James Thompson, *Equipped for Change: Studies in the Pastoral Epistles* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1996). Reviewed by Ira J. Jolivet, Jr.

As its title suggests, *Equipped for Change* is addressed to churches in transition. More specifically, the book is intended to assist congregations of the Churches of Christ in their efforts to make the appropriate changes necessary for survival while at the same time remaining faithful to the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith. The author, James Thompson, sees the Pastoral Epistles as potentially beneficial in these efforts because the churches to which Timothy and Titus ministered were also in a transitional state due to the imminent death of the apostle Paul.

The primary threat that Paul anticipated and sought to counteract was the activity of false teachers, which, if left unchallenged and uncorrected, would have had disastrous effects on the churches and on the lives of the individual members of which they were composed. As a remedy for the moral diseases produced by false teaching, Paul instructed Timothy and Titus to administer “sound doctrine.” The content of this healthy doctrine was not, as some have taught, a body of legalistic dogma, but rather “the central Christian convictions of the saving significance of the cross of Christ” (11). And unlike false teaching, which ultimately destroys human relationships and corrupts minds and souls, sound doctrine has as its goal “love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5). Since sound doctrine produces moral lives, Timothy and Titus were not only to be concerned with the pedagogical aspects of their teaching, but to be models of its end products as well.

Paul also cautioned the young evangelists to treat the core message of the gospel as a valuable deposit that had been placed in their hands for safekeeping. They were not,

upon God and speak for me. Then I could talk to God and know that he would hear me. Then God could speak to me, and I would not be overwhelmed."

In the end, Job has to meet with God alone. God booms from the heavens and says, "I am God." And in the end, Job is reduced to silence. "I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer—twice, but I will say no more."

Job wanted a middle man, but he did not find one. He was a man before his time. He did not know that God's middle man was on his way.

Jesus and Faithful Conversation

We live in a world very different from Job's. Oh, our lives still get messy and confused. We still long to bring our questions and complaints to God. There are still those around us who tell us to stifle ourselves when we try to keep talking. We still find conversation with God a difficult, unsettling, risky, demanding endeavor. And we still find ourselves needing "someone to stand between us, someone to lay his hand upon us both."

But the more things stay the same, the more they change. What Job could only ask for, we've been given! What Job needed, we have found!

Mr. Job, meet Jesus Christ. He is our advocate. He is our intercessor. He is the friend who pleads for us with God. He is the one who stands between us. He lays his hand upon us both. He is the middle man who has one foot on the ash heap and one foot in heaven. He is the only one to know what it is to be flesh and what it is to be God. He speaks in the tongues of men and of angels. He can put his hand on us and explain God. And he can lay his hand upon God and explain us. And because we have Jesus Christ, we can talk to God and know that he hears us. Because we have Jesus Christ, God speaks to us, and we are not overwhelmed.

I am thankful that Jesus came to earth. "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who was tempted in every way, just as we are" (Heb 4:15). Because he lived, he can put his hand on us both. And I am thankful that Jesus died on the cross. "We were reconciled to God through the death of his Son" (Rom 5:10). Because he died, he can put his hand upon us both. And I am thankful that Jesus was resurrected. "By his power God raised [Jesus] from the dead, and he will raise us also" (1 Cor 6:14). Because he arose, Jesus can put his hand upon us both.

But there is more to the story of Jesus than that. The life, the death, the resurrection of Jesus Christ are God's promise that conversation is always possible, that he will go to any length to keep the conversation going. But two thousand years ago was only the first installment of Jesus' interceding work. It

bought Jesus the right to be our mediator. It permitted him to put one hand on God and one hand on us.

But there is more to the story of Jesus than that! For right now, Jesus has his hand on the shoulder of God, pleading for you and me (Heb 9:24). Jesus is standing at the right hand of God, interceding for us (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25). At this very moment, he is speaking to the Father in our defense (1 John 2:1). He is acting as our high priest, entering heavenly places on our behalf (Heb 6:19–20).

And right now, Jesus has his hand on our shoulders. His Spirit is alive within us (Rom 8:9). His Spirit is teaching us the deep things of God this very moment (1 Cor 2:10). Even now, his Spirit is supporting us in our weakness and helping us to pray with groans that words cannot express (Rom 8:26). By that Spirit, we are able to cry out, "Abba, Father" tonight (Gal 4:6). With every breath, the Spirit of Jesus is filling us with power and hope and encouragement (Rom 5:5; 15:5, 13; Eph 3:16; 2 Tim 1:7). It's not by accident we call that Spirit the "Comforter," the "Intercessor," the "Advocate."

Jesus is busier, more active, working harder right now than at any time when he walked on the earth. His arms must be tired, stretched so often between heaven and earth.

But because we have a friend in Jesus, we can speak up before God. Because Jesus stands between us, there is room for words. All those things we've wanted to say to God, we can speak. Our questions, our complaints, our hard words—all find their voice through Jesus. That difficult, unsettling, risky, demanding conversation with God goes on—because Jesus stands between us.

Conclusion

That's what I would like to tell Job's wife. "I know you've had a hard time. I know you are hurting. I know you are angry with God. But don't curse God. Don't lapse into a sullen silence. Jesus can be your voice. He can speak for you and help you understand."

That's what I would like to tell Job's friends. "Don't tell people to curse themselves. Jesus takes us more seriously than that. He can handle all the messiness you are so afraid of. He knows we are but flesh, and still he defends us before the Father."

And that's what I would like to tell Job. "Your advocate has come. The one you asked for is here. Your friend who pleads with God has arrived. His name is Jesus Christ. And his hand is upon us both."

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